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Miners, masculinity and the ‘bataille du charbon’ in France 1944-48.

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Abstract

In 1944, the French provisional government, backed by the PCF and the CGT undertook an aggressive propaganda campaign to persuade miners to embark upon a ‘battle for coal’ which raised their efforts in extracting coal to that of national endeavour. At the same time, miners had great hopes that nationalisation of the coal industry, under discussion at this time, would bring significant improvement to their working lives. In identifying the ways in which publicists posited miners as an ideal of working-class manhood, this article will argue that ‘*la bataille du charbon*’ marks a crucial moment in the celebration of working class masculinity and that the *statut des mineurs* which was passed in 1946 as a part of nationalisation enshrined many of the existing gender assumptions about mining life. What does an incorporation of gender to an analysis of the treatment of miners in the years 1944-48 add to our understandings of the various economic, political and social dynamics around the *bataille du charbon*? How do these insights inform our perceptions of French coalfield societies in the mid twentieth century?

Les mineurs, la masculinité et la bataille du charbon en France 1944-48

En 1944, le gouvernement provisoire français, soutenu par le PCF et la CGT s'engagea dans une propagande agressive pour persuader les mineurs de se lancer dans une bataille du charbon, laquelle se traduisit par une augmentation de leurs efforts à extraire du charbon pour la cause nationale. Parallèlement, les mineurs mettaient beaucoup d'espoir dans la nationalisation de l'industrie du charbon, en discussion à ce moment-là, pensant qu'elle générerait des améliorations significatives dans leurs vies quotidiennes. En identifiant les supports au moyen desquels les publicistes positionnent les mineurs comme l'idéal de la classe masculine ouvrière, cet article argumentera que la bataille du charbon marque un moment crucial dans la célébration de la masculinité de la classe ouvrière et que le statut des mineurs qui a été reconnu en 1946 au moment de la nationalisation a consacré dans la loi les modalités de la vie minière en pratique vis-à-vis du genre. Qu'est ce que l'incorporation du genre dans l'analyse du traitement des mineurs dans les années 1944-48 ajoute à notre compréhension des différents paramètres économiques, politiques et sociaux autour de la bataille du charbon ? Dans quelle mesure ces aperçus nous permettent de mieux appréhender les sociétés minières françaises au milieu du vingtième siècle ?

Miners, masculinity and the 'bataille du charbon' in France

1944-48

La patrie est en danger

Mineur tu peux la sauver!

In late 1944, the French provisional government decided to foreground the coal industry as a crucial building block in its policies for post war reconstruction. The economic realities meant that the production of coal was essential to the resurgence of the French economy. While plans were being discussed to decide the exact form that nationalisation of the coal board would take, an outbreak of strikes in 1945 led mine directors to decide that miners needed to be reminded of their 'duty'. Coal was at the heart of industrial France and if the economy was to recover, miners had to abandon their strike activity and apply themselves to increasing production. An aggressive propaganda campaign was undertaken to persuade miners that their war-time battles were not terminated during the liberation and they were urged to embark upon a post war 'battle for coal'. In this way, the dangerous, filthy, dusty and physically exhausting work that was mining, with its constant stream of injuries and deaths, was glamorised in the interests of the nation. The idea of battling for coal was not new but whereas in the past miners had been exhorted to fight to improve production for the good of the company, propagandists now raised their efforts in extracting coal to that of a national endeavour. Conveniently distant from the political classes who were seen as responsible for the defeat and the military generals who failed to prevent it, the earthy working class mineworker was quite the counterpoint to the rural peasant men that had dominated recent propaganda under Vichy. Miners emerged from the

war untainted by collaboration which meant that those promoting the image of the miner could still safely draw on traditional representations of miners as French workers. The country needed a positive symbol of reconstruction to latch on to, and miners appeared to offer it.

The propagandising of the 'battle for coal' can also be positioned as one of a series of moves which were designed to boost French masculinity. Miners at this time provided the nation with a positive representation of working men which can be inscribed within the need to address the crisis of French manhood in the immediate post war period discussed by commentators (Kelly, 1995; Capdevila, 1998, 2001). At a time when France was coming to terms with the experiences of the Second World War at all levels of society, attention was turned to these working class heroes. Posters urging miners to produce ever more coal drew on well established symbolic understandings of French manhood and these images projected an explicit symbolism of the virile male industrial worker which was also present in other poster campaigns related to post war reconstruction at that time (Capdevila, 1998). The pictures of miners that circulated represented miners explicitly as soldiers and the metaphor of battle drew on the same stereotypes which presented the military male in iconic terms. In this way, drawing on a vocabulary of manliness, protection and rebuilding France, the soldier hero narrative was effectively mobilised and miners could provide an ideal model to emulate. This was a chance for French men to recoup some self esteem after the humiliations of the wartime period.

Mining did not just offer an exaggerated form of masculinity but equally importantly, it was one of the few sectors that had been immune to some of the gender changes

that had taken place elsewhere in French society during the war. While women had replaced men in many sectors of the workforce in the absence of men, women did not enter mining, so gender roles in mining communities remained relatively stable (Frader, 2002, 229). By comparison with other industrial sectors, few miners were called up as they were often excused mobilisation. This meant that miners could be defined as an ideal of masculinity which had not been impacted by wartime changes in gender roles. Holding mining society up for admiration at this time of post war gender confusion was not coincidental. Its stark gender role division made it a valuable model during this period of adaptation when the government was seeking to persuade women to return to the domestic sphere and surrender the jobs they had taken on during the war in the absence of the men (Diamond, 1999). The clearly defined gender roles which kept miner's wives firmly in the domestic sphere as mothers of large families chimed in with the natalist propaganda of the provisional government which was urging women to return to the home and produce children to rebuild the French nation. Their full breadwinner status, with a dependent wife, meant miners provided positive symbols for renewal in a way that reflected the concerns of post-Liberation France.

Much of this propaganda was in fact crafted by the communists. From 1944, the PCF decided that miners were of particular interest to them. The communists had emerged from the war with a strengthened hand because of their resistance record, and were able to enter national politics for the first time. Their publicists thought that miners could provide them with an effective vehicle to promote their own ambitions and the creation of a communist identity linked to miners would be a way for them to extend their influence over the working classes (Lazar, 1985). It could also help them to manage Thorez's reputation after his absence from France during the war with an eye

on gaining respectability with the Gaullist dominated provisional government. Hence, the masculine imagery of the mineworker coincided with the needs of the PCF to popularise its role and also provide a strong legitimacy for their leader Maurice Thorez who could draw on his mining origins and present himself as a man of the people. In 1945, publicists of the CGT and the PCF therefore set out to fashion miners as the perfect illustration of the new proletarian worker who would lead the nation to recovery.

In this way, in the immediate post war years, miners were positioned at the centre of intersecting national, industrial, economic, political and social concerns. While many of the complexities relating to mobilisation of miners at this time have been charted by other historians (Mattéi, 1987; Trempé, 1989; Holter, 1992), what has not yet been explored is the importance of gender to an understanding of these events. This article will therefore draw on much of the existing literature about mining in this period and will also introduce material from other primary sources including mining company archives and communist newspapers to offer a gendered reading of the treatment of miners in the years 1944 – 48.¹ It will argue that during *la bataille du charbon* miners were represented as ideals of working class manhood and that the *statut des mineurs* which was passed in 1946 as a part of nationalisation not only compensated miners for the dangerous nature of their work, but also, in codifying miner's rights, it enshrined many of the existing gender assumptions about mining life. What does an incorporation of gender add to our understandings of the various economic, political and social dynamics around the *bataille du charbon*? How do these insights inform our perceptions of French coalfield societies in the mid twentieth century?

The propagandising of the ‘bataille du charbon’

On 17 May 1945 in response to a wave of strikes which had broken out in mining areas, Robert Lacoste, socialist minister in the provisional government addressed a radio appeal to miners. He called on them to increase production and requested that they refrain from expressing their demands in the form of strikes warning them that ‘Le manque du charbon constitue dès à présent un véritable péril nationale’. He finished by exclaiming, ‘Mineurs de France, on a besoin de vous pour que vive la France’. This appeal, however, had little impact and it was not until the communist leader, Maurice Thorez, lent his voice by making a strong ‘appel à la production’ in a speech in Waziers, a very small mining area, on 21 July 1945 that these calls started to be noticed more widely. Rather than lending support to the claims of the striking miners as was expected, Thorez urged miners that they should not strike; to the contrary, they should apply themselves enthusiastically to increasing production levels. This, he insisted, was their national duty. His position surprised many contemporary commentators and his speech was reported widely both inside and outside mining areas. ‘Produire et encore produire du charbon, c’est aujourd’hui la forme la plus élevée de votre devoir de class, de votre devoir de Français’, he exclaimed (Mattei, 1987, 293). Here he explicitly linked mineworker’s identity to patriotism and class identity emphasising also their duty as Frenchmen. In the same speech, Thorez went on to draw on mythologized images of the French miner and placed a large emphasis on persuading miners to take pride in their work. The ‘battle for coal’ was launched.

From September 1945, colourful posters were plastered on the walls of the pits which proclaimed; 'Pour reconstruire la France nous avons besoin du charbon'. Picking up the colours of the French flag, these posters sought to appeal to the miner's patriotic sensibilities. Miners appeared in film newsreels and in newsprint portrayed in these positive terms. The publicists were evidently hoping that miners would find this presentation of their vocation inspiring and modify their own behaviour accordingly. Posters were distributed carrying a wide range of slogans (Jeanneau, 1986). One declared the following: 'Chaque kilo de charbon en plus est une victoire' suggesting therefore that any less than this would be a betrayal. That the fate of the country was in the hands of the miners who had the power to turn things around was often repeated in these slogans and appeals were made to their moral responsibility to work harder. '40,000,000 de Français attendent du charbon', emphasised the point that they were not just working for the benefit of their own employers, but for that of the nation at large. 'Le charbon est le sang de la France' made direct reference to the imagery of battle projecting France as the body that needs protecting and without the coal which represents its blood, the country could not function. '100,000 tons de charbon par jour: c'est ce que la France attend de toi' introduced the idea of setting targets, drawing on the notion that France expects its miners to produce. Most remarkably, one poster showed only the hands of a miner holding a map of France cut out from the rest of Europe and inscribed with the slogan 'Mineur, le sort de la France est entre tes mains'. This was probably the most widely recognised poster at the time.

By promoting miners and placing them at the centre of post war recovery as the idealised male worker, the PCF was not just mobilising a stronghold of communist support but it was also demonstrating that here was a crucial sector of working labour over which it could be seen to exert influence, and even perhaps, some degree of

control. It seems likely that the publicists were setting out to prove that the party could behave responsibly and work in the interests of the country. Therefore, much was at stake for the PCF and CGT. The battle for coal had to be won if their reputations were to survive. Thorez too had his agenda in promoting the 'bataille'. His speeches urging the miners to work harder and not to slack were as much a bid to persuade de Gaulle to take him seriously as someone who had influence over this important sector of French labour as they were an initiative designed to improve production. Seeking to put into practice the idea that leaders lead by example, many communist leaders descended to work a shift in the mines to show their support for the production campaign. Thorez was among those to do this and he made many visits to mining basins during this period showing the high priority the PCF placed on this effort (Holter, 1992, 90). Thorez had particular reasons for promoting and identifying with miners, since he himself in *Fils du Peuple* (1937) had made his mining background one of the key factors of his legitimacy as Secretary General of the Party.

The traditional iconic image of a miner admired for his 'masculine' qualities was well established by 1945. The representations presented in the posters and the newsreels were similar to other posters celebrating French labour in circulation at this time.

Miners fostered a cult of toughness, risking death on a daily basis. The miner was seen as a hero of the 'ténèbres', in love with his hard labour, an invincible soldier of the 'abîme', courageously in the service of the common good. Writing in *Action* on 22 March 1946, Thorez emphasises many of these characteristics, in particular, the bravery and heroism of the miner. 'Quelle grandeur dans cette lutte farouche contre la matière, dans ce corps à corps perpétuel où l'homme, accroupi, souvent couché, dans toutes les positions du combat, arrache le charbon à l'étreinte de la roche qui l'enserre.' This imagery which emphasises the virility and ultra-masculinity of the

miner also reflected positively on the PCF leader. By writing in such positive terms both Thorez and the miners benefited from a kind of mutually reflected glory from one to the other. The attachment the miner has to his milieu and his profession, his virile strength and physical labour were all qualities that made them an ideal model of working class labour. If miners could brave the difficulties of the ongoing rationing and severe winters of these post war years in the interests of the nation, so could workers in other sectors. Miners, like dockers, belonged to a well-defined group of workers marked by their solidarity which for miners operated underground. They represented team work and interdependence, working in a sector which was industrial yet still had strong links with nature, they projected an earthy simplicity. The mysteriousness attached to their work underground added to their mythical status (Cooper-Richet, 2002, 300).

Newspapers and speeches depicted the production campaign in terms of the miners' voluntarism, patriotism and class consciousness. Miners were projected as heroes who had battled with the Nazis during the Occupation. This 'battle for coal' was explicitly linked back to the battle for survival against the Nazis. Miners had strong resistance credentials, as had been evidenced by the strikes and go slows in the coalfields in the north of France in May 1941 when 100,000 risked German repression. The communist, Auguste Lecoeur, appointed Minister of Labour in 1944, was one of the instigators of these strikes. He would later draw on this experience to argue that the communists did not wait until the German invasion of Russia to activate resistance during the Occupation. The July 1938 law had made mining a protected sector so miners were not called up to fight. This made it possible for mining employment to act as a valuable cover for those who wanted to remain out of sight of the authorities

during the Occupation. Many young male workers who were avoiding the 1943 Service de Travail Obligatoire were therefore absorbed into the mining labour force and thereby escaped being forcibly taken to work in Germany. In Provence for example :

L'effectif des ouvriers de la mine de Saint-Savournin doublera presque avec tous ces nouveaux mineurs... Pour les embarquer sans éveiller l'attention des inspecteurs de STO, Monsieur Pervergne, grâce à la complicité de conseillers municipaux des villages voisins, va leur procurer de nouvelles pièces d'identité ou truquer les dates d'embauche.²

Miners themselves were very conscious of their own resistance credentials as this quote from *Rouge Midi* on 27 October 1944 shows: 'Les mineurs ont été à l'avant garde dans la lutte pour le pain et la Libération... Toute la jeunesse a pris les armes pour chasser l'ennemi de nos puits.' In this way, miners could contribute both to the Gaullist myth of Resistance and to the Communist claim to be the 'Parti des Fusillés'.

Communist leaders drew on a mythic representation of the French miner who was born a worker and a soldier. Robert Nye identifies the complex relation between the soldier and citizen in the history of masculinity (Nye, 2007). Historically societies have valued military masculinity and the personal characteristics of manliness that it comprises more highly than civic virtue and its corresponding masculinity. By representing miners in military terms, miners were projected as being in possession of the masculine characteristics of the soldier. Victor Duguet in a speech to the National Conference of the Confederation of Mineworkers in April 1945 called upon miners to 'se considérer comme des soldats' (Trempe, 1989, 216). De Gaulle's speech at Béthune in August 1945 called on mineworkers to produce in ways which resonated

closely with his other Appel in June 1940 which miners remembered. This gave them a mission which had obvious parallels with that of the Resistance. At the funeral of thirteen miners killed in a catastrophe in Oignies in 1946, Auguste Lecoœur, drew the following lesson from events:

Lorsque nous luttons pour relever le pays, la meilleure façon de venger nos morts était de frapper plus fort que l'ennemi. Aujourd'hui des camarades tombés dans la bataille pour la renaissance française, nous les vengerons en redoublant d'efforts pour relever le pays (Mattéi, 1987, 299).

The miners were killed at work and, 'on prend appui sur eux', to produce even more and push the sacrifice even further. Here Lecoœur, once again reinforced the explicit link with the imagery of a soldier engaged in battle. In this way, by being prepared to face danger and sacrifice for the good of the nation, he was also suggesting that miners offered a way for French manhood to gain redemption for their failings during the war.

In order to improve production rates, the mining administration also had to ensure that miners went into work regularly. To achieve this they had to battle with absenteeism which was an acute ongoing problem in the sector and causing major losses to the industry. In 1946, it reached 20% and went up to 22% in 1947, figures which were higher than ever before, even under Vichy. Trempé has argued that this absenteeism, especially taking sick leave was a form of resistance to these drives for increased production (Trempé, 1989, 189-190). It was hardly surprising therefore that when miners were urged to work supplementary shifts on Sundays and bank holidays to boost output, there was widespread opposition and many refused to do so.

Absenteeism therefore became a key target of the propagandists. Thorez, in his

Waziers speech, had already scolded them for failing to attend more assiduously. Only in doing so, he pressed, could they fulfil their commitment to the communist revolution.

... j'ai été jeune aussi. J'ai été aussi au bal et j'ai dansé, mais je n'ai pas manqué un seul poste à cause d'une fête ou d'une dimanche. Je dis aux jeunes : il faut avoir le goût de son ouvrage, parce qu'il faut trouver dans son travail la condition de sa propre élévation et de l'élévation générale : les parraisseux ne seront jamais de bons communisantes, de bons révolutionnaires, jamais, jamais. Les mineurs courageux, ceux qui ne craignent pas la peine, ceux qui connaissent leur métier, ceux qui ont toujours été les meilleurs de nos militants ouvriers, ont été les pionniers, les organisateurs de nos syndicats, les piliers de notre parti (...) (Mattéi, 1987, 294)

The literature produced by the French coal board reflects this same concern to combat unauthorised absences.

Guerre aux creux de lundi! Une bonne semaine commence par un bon lundi. A l'heure ou la bataille du charbon bat son plein, ne pas venir le lundi est une désertion. Le lundi comme les autres jours, tu mettras toutes tes forces au service du pays qui compte sur toi pour gagner la bataille du charbon.³

The language here is carefully familiar but also impersonal, reinforcing the idea that absence personifies the enemy, the deserter, the traitor, the lazy one. The deserter is associated with weakness and is set against the super-masculinity of the fighter. The deserter undermines the heroism of miners fighting to reconstruct the nation. Failure to go to work was posited as failing in their patriotic duty as French men.

Nationalisation and the *statut des mineurs*

The impact of this propaganda on the wider French public is difficult to establish but the PCF clearly felt that the miners were well positioned. Coal provided 80% of the energy needs of the country and after their experiences of energy rationing during the Occupation and during the extremely cold post war winters, people were well aware of the importance of coal to their own personal comfort. Miners, for their part, were more concerned about their own grievances and were hopeful that their presence in the public arena and the apparent attention that they were getting would provide them with an opportunity to advance their own interests. Their participation in the production campaign appeared to provide them with a valuable bargaining tool. They looked to the PCF and the CGT to use their newly acquired influence in government to secure nationalisation of the sector. For miners, this had particular importance as they saw it as their opportunity to have more control over the organisation of their industry and to escape the old mine owners and what Henri Martel, the communist syndicalist miner and Deputy for Nord, put as ‘un véritable régime de terreur, brimant, déclassant des centaines de milliers de mineurs’ (Patoz, 1996, 16). This was doubtless somewhat exaggerated, but nonetheless, it was a longstanding dream for miners who believed that nationalisation would allow them to have a more active involvement in the management of their own industry. Elected union representatives would be co-opted to positions where they would be able to participate in management. The time seemed right since the nationalisation of the core French industries had been written into the programme of the CNR from 1943.

Such a significant change in the way their industry was organised, miners believed, would be sure to bring them fairer salaries and better working conditions. More immediately, they also wanted their rations to be reviewed and this quote from *Rouge Midi*, dated 28 October 1944 gives some sense of this:

Qu'on ne s'y trompe pas. Le malaise qui existe chez tous les mineurs du bassin est sérieux et les pouvoirs publics seraient bien inspirés en prêtant une oreille attentive à nos revendications. Nous ne sommes pas réfractaires à l'effort de production qui nous est demandé pour la défense du pays, mais nous demandons que, parallèlement à un meilleur ravitaillement, les salaires qui nous sont alloués soient étudiés d'une façon rationnelle et objective.

Any increase in production was only going to be an option as far as the miners were concerned if their demands were taken seriously. Rationing remained in force in France until 1948 and shortages in the immediate aftermath of the war were often more acute than they had been during the Occupation. Miners considered that it was unreasonable to expect them to increase production without the provision of a corresponding increase in rations. A union document in September 1945 on the activities of their section in the Pas-de-Calais reported the following:

Les ouvriers mineurs se retournent peu (font peu de cas) des slogans de production lancés par certaines organes de presse et, à ce sujet, ils ne se cachent pas de dire que des slogans ne peuvent servir qu'à des individus avides d'une place politique et syndicale. Ce qui a tendance à pousser les mineurs au rendement, c'est l'amélioration du ravitaillement et l'aide apportée par les prisonniers de guerre allemands (Mattéi, 1986, 38).

There is a certain irony in the fact that the battle for coal could not have been won without recourse to German prisoners-of-war who made up the shortfall in the mining

labour force at time when there was a real disaffection for taking up mining employment. The *Cahier Français de l'Information* published in 1947 puts the contribution of 50,000 German prisoners-of-war as accounting for 20% of coal production for the entire year of 1946. Paradoxically, these emasculated ex soldiers, formerly the pride of the German armies were now being forced to work in the mines, quite a different image to that of the French miners who were being celebrated here.

So acute were the labour shortages in the mining sector that the Ministry of Work had even suggested sending those repatriated from STO into the mines at the end of 1945. However, this was rejected by the unions who felt that this would be assimilated as a punishment and thereby devalue the sector even further (Trempe, 1989, 18-19). They also feared that the men who were complete strangers to mining and mining life would struggle to accustom themselves to it. Mine directors recognised that more had to be done to boost the attractiveness of the profession to aid recruitment and therefore agreed that the economic reorganisation of the sector under nationalisation should be accompanied by a 'statut des mineurs' which would unify all the different practices of the different mine owners across the country into one legal document which codified structures, hierarchies and working practices across the country. At the first meeting convened to discuss the statute in September 1945, two key aims were identified. Firstly, that the dangers of mining work had to be offset with 'des avantages spéciaux'. Secondly, a system should be put into place which would 'favoriser le recrutement des ouvriers mineurs'.⁴ The fact that German prisoners of war had to be brought in massively to support coal production was clear evidence of the chronic lack of mineworkers. This labour force had also been particularly impacted by the departure of several thousand skilled Polish workers who had

returned home at end of the war. The sector was dogged by labour shortages and there was a real fear that if they were not offered improvements to their material situation, miners might abandon their profession. Victorin Duguet, opened the 1945 annual general conference of the Federation of Underground Mineworkers in the following terms:

N'oublions pas que nos mines, toutes nos mines sont de plus en plus désertées, les parents répugnant d'apprendre à leurs fils le métier de mineur. Même la main d'œuvre étrangère cherche à s'employer ailleurs, parce que le métier de mineur est considéré comme le dernier des métiers. ⁵

Traditionally sons had followed fathers into the profession but miners were urging their sons to find work elsewhere and they were showing a marked tendency to do so. However, it was widely felt by those managing the mines that efforts should be made to reverse this trend. In their view, sons of miners still made the best miners.

Eventually, the National Assembly on 19 April 1946 adopted by 516 votes to 31 the project for the nationalisation of the mines presented by Martel. It was clear to all present at the time that miners would not have accepted a continuation of the way the industry was organised before the war and as the communist deputy made clear, the government had little choice but to concede to nationalisation if the battle for coal was to be won. In this way, economic necessity empowered miners to pressurise government (with the support of the communists) to push through nationalisation. Indeed, the imagery of miners as victims evoked by Martel was one which virtually disappeared from this time onwards. Gone were the images of exploited, victimised miners which dominated the representations in Zola's *Germinal*. The propaganda now sought to emphasise masculine power and bravery rather than feminised victimhood.

The idea of miners as disempowered victims of capitalism was relegated to the nineteenth century, a new twentieth century image of miners at the forefront of industrial renewal and modernism had taken its place. The rapidity of the application degrees designed to put nationalisation into effect was remarkable. The sector was extensively restructured and, anxious to safeguard their influence in the mining world and keen to demonstrate tangible evidence of this influence, some weeks later, the CGT and the PCF also pushed through the *statut des mineurs* on the understanding that in exchange miners would win the battle for coal. The combination of nationalisation, the mining statute and economic change in mining were presented by the press as bringing significant and positive improvement to mining communities.

The terms of the statute actively sought to offer very real benefits for miners such that the profession would retain those within it and potentially appeal to others who might consider joining it. Obviously, salaries were a crucial aspect of how mining was perceived both within and outside the sector. Traditionally, most miners had been sufficiently well paid that their salary met the needs of the entire family. In this context, commentators have identified how men's pride in their sense of masculinity invariably came from their capacity to provide for and support their family. In some sectors this was also linked to a fear that in the absence of an adequate male breadwinner, married women were being forced into paid employment, and this step was resented as a threat to the working class family (Horne, 2004, 34). In mining society, it was common for single women to find work sorting the coal or as an office employee, but after marriage, women would normally cease work and dedicate themselves entirely to caring for their husbands and children. When the mines were still independently owned, this was often reinforced by oral advice from the hierarchy

though it was never put in writing (Le Tirant, 2002, 26). It was generally considered inappropriate for two salaries to be drawn from the mine and married women rarely took paid employment unless they were widowed or their husband was seriously injured.

Under the statute, changes to the ways salaries were calculated, led, in some cases, to increases of more than 30% for those in the lowest categories. Miners became the best paid of industrial workers, literally therefore the masculine elite of all workers. Under its terms, a miner working underground would earn 132 per cent of the salary of a Parisian metalworker. This considerable improvement in salaries reinforced their position as the main breadwinner in mining families by continuing to make it unnecessary for miner's wives to seek employment. In this way, by guaranteeing a better income for miners than most other workers, the statute made it possible for them to continue to keep their wives at home and thereby also reinforced their patriarchal status within the family.

In addition to the crown of '*premier ouvrier de France*' (see poster) and increased salaries, miners were to benefit from further advantages. Their days of paid holiday went up to 24 days for those who had worked for at least ten years, significantly more than the holiday allowances attributed to most workers. They were also granted free transport to work and the much sought-after increase in rations. Most importantly perhaps, in gender terms, the statute also made official the perks in relation to housing and the attribution of coal which had long been practiced in some coalfields and extended these across all mining regions. In particular, a commitment to '*logement gratuit à vie*' which the miners had long called for was formalised. This was a major

breakthrough which carried a strong symbolism and offered miners a very real advantage compared to other sectors. In addition, a generous social security system with retirement at 50 which allowed for the medical expenses of miners and their families to be reimbursed was the envy of other workers. Such benefits were designed not only to attract new workers into mining, but also to make the mining sector a difficult one to leave; most importantly, it was hoped that these measures would encourage sons of miners to follow their fathers into the sector. Similarly, those who drafted the statute believed that these measures might also prevent daughters of miners from seeking marriage outside the community as they would want to continue to benefit from the 'comforts' of life in the mining villages. In a real sense therefore, miner's masculinity and status was confirmed, even boosted by these measures. They emerged as kings of the industrial sector and as such a very attractive catch for a working class woman. In this way, the traditional model of mining society which had evolved over the previous century was put into legal form by the miner's statute; it was a vision of a community that relied strictly on a gender division which was shaped by a male universe of work with women playing a role on the sidelines, heavily burdened with domestic tasks.

In an effort to demonstrate the ways in which the 'statut des mineurs' could advantage miners and to show how it had put miners into the aristocracy of working men, the new Charbonnages de France dedicated its first feature film, *Mineurs de France* (1947) to emphasising all these positive aspects of mining life. Designed as recruitment propaganda, it was also screened in mining basins around the country in an attempt to boost miner's self image. It dwelled extensively on the advantages miners had gained from the statute, portraying the miners as glorified athletic soldiers,

courageous and tireless in their mission to rebuild the nation through the battle for coal. In the closing moments of the film, the voice-over urges:

Comment le mineur ne sentirait-il pas fier de ce qu'il représente? Conscient de sa responsabilité, qu'il soit ingénieur ou jeune apprenti, il sait qu'il collabore à une grande tâche nationale. Il a le droit de sourire et de regarder l'avenir avec confiance car la ténacité de son effort et l'importance de sa mission en ont fait le premier ouvrier de France.

Here, miners have truly shaken off their nineteenth century imagery of victimhood, fearing death and exploitation by their employers. Mining has opened up to technical advances and modernisation and miners are projected as the 'new' workers who can carry this to fruition in one of the most essential sectors in the country. The miner's life takes a central position and as husband and father, his privileged position means he can provide for everyone comfortably and take advantage of all the pleasure that mining villages have to offer including leisure activities and comfortable, modern accommodation. While everyone else is suffering the austerity and uncertainty of post war reconstruction, miners have a secure future and they can afford to smile (Holler, 2004).

The measures of the statute, the elevation of miners to their position of first French worker and the associated benefits it brought further reinforced the positive imagery around the battle for coal. By mid 1947, levels of coal had increased dramatically and finally the publicists could trumpet that the battle for coal was being won. In April, the levels of production were 20% above what they had been in 1938 (Ferrières, 1996, 21). The soldiers of the underground were victorious.

However, within months, these icons of French maleness soon realised that they had been sold short. The communists left government on 5 May 1947 and soon afterwards, miners found one of the most vital of their new advantages, their salaries, were put under review. Before long they found themselves in open conflict with their new employers, the state. The PCF and CGT called out their followers and along with other workers, miners became engaged in one of the most acrimonious strikes the sector had ever known. The now embattled communists, desperate for public support and anxious to keep the miners on board, decided once again to draw on the imagery that they had been able to mobilise so successfully in the months beforehand. Even as the beginnings of the Cold War took hold and the communists had to battle against their diminishing reputations in mining basins, the active participation of the miners in the strikes of 1947-48 provided their propagandists with another ideal opportunity to promote the now familiar images of these masculine heroes in a bid to elicit support for the strikes.

The extensive mobilisation of miners during the strikes despite its failure and despite the fact that many became disillusioned with the communists and withdrew their support for them, was sufficient for the propagandists to add another layer of symbolism to the post war images, portraying the miners as activists of the worker's movement, sacrificing themselves in widely publicised conflicts (which sometimes appeared to resemble open warfare between miners and the police) for the good of all working people. The communist paper *Midi Soir* published in Marseille on 4 October 1948 emphasised that police mobilisation against the miners could have no effect 'sur ces rudes travailleurs habitués à jouer quotidiennement avec des dangers d'un autre ordre'. In their fight, miners were portrayed as continuing the proletarian and patriotic

traditions of the working classes. The *Marseillais* declared on 5 and 8 October 1948 that miners, had already given ‘des preuves tangibles de [leur] attachement à l’intérêt national’ when they ‘tinrent tête aux Nazis en 1941 et portèrent en un temps record la production a 120% de celle de 1938’. The paper affirmed on 29 October that ‘les mineurs se battent actuellement pour tous les travailleurs, tous les démocrates, pour tous les patriotes’.

The terrible repression which befell mining basins during the strikes added to the romantic impact of their lost battles and communist writers, artists and film makers responded to these images by seeking to portray miner’s lives. These include the short stories of André Still, *Le mot mineur, camarades*, published in 1949, the 1951 exhibition ‘Le Pays des Mines’ by André Fougeron and, most notably, Louis Daquin’s 1949 film *Le Point du jour*. The film emphasises the fraternity of the miners showing how engineers and mine workers could find common cause and that their interests transcended class difference. Filmed underground it offers a very realistic portrayal of the working lives of miners and mobilises many of the established symbolic representations under discussion here.

What can we conclude from this representation of the miner as a working class and patriotic hero? There is no doubt that the Battle for Coal marked the pinnacle of popularity for French miners and also gave them the opportunity to take pride in their profession and achievements. It was a highpoint of the assertion of working class masculinity and it is a representation which has marked French popular memory and influenced stereotypes and understandings of mining since. Miners inspired universal respect in French society and as such they emerged in 1945 as a compelling

representation of the ‘best’ of French manhood. What then of the *statut des mineurs*? Were the rewards it offered male miners enough to keep them in the sector? Did the patriarchal order it set in stone serve to tempt further recruits into the industry? The answer is somewhat nuanced. It is difficult to evaluate the impact of the publicity campaigns and mining statute on recruitment since patterns tended to vary from coalfield to coalfield. The numbers of miners certainly increased dramatically in many mining basins and in 1947, the national figures reached record numbers which exceeded 350,000 workers.⁷ In Provence, the Rapport du Conseil d’Administration reported on 17 May 1946 that the statute had aided recruitment: ‘Les avantages accordés aux mineurs, tout au point de vue des salaires et en ce qui concerne le ravitaillement ont attiré à la mine un nombre relativement élevé d’ouvriers’.⁸ In 1948, this was reinforced by the observation that : ‘Le recrutement local nous a permis d’assurer le remplacement des ouvriers qui sont partis’.⁹ However, nationally speaking, many of those recruited were foreign workers from Italy, Algeria and Morocco who were recruited massively especially in the larger coalfields in northern France. They made up the shortfall in the labour force after the departure of the German prisoners of war, comparatively few were French workers.

On the other hand, a study of the labour force in the Loire mining basin between 1946 and 1953 shows that while the foreign labour force was very instable, the French labour force remained remarkably stable (Trempe, 2000, 17). This suggests that French miners may have been joined by other workers, but those who were already there did not leave their jobs and once they had taken up mining employment they tended to stay in the sector as the mine directors had hoped. There is further evidence which appears to confirm these findings. A study of the attitudes of miners in the

Centre-Midi, conducted in March-April 1956 by the INED emphasises the insular nature of the sector concluding that ‘le milieu est défini par l’homogénéité, mieux encore l’unité’.⁶ It went on to say: ‘Les femmes de mineurs ont les mêmes origines que leurs maris, ... une population qui se renouvelle par elle-même, par des mariages internes ... [dans] une aire géographique assez strictement limitée.’ One of the interviewers reported that ‘La femme insiste également sur le fait qu’il n’est plus raisonnable de changer de métier’. Hence, in this context, all the advantages introduced appear to have persuaded these families to stay in mining where they found themselves to be better placed than those working in other industries. So much so perhaps that as Le Triant has concluded, many miner’s wives faced an ‘impossibilité de partir’ ... ‘Partir c’est rompre avec le régime minier, avec le cocon de la cité, avec le réseau social voire familial’ (Le Tirant, 2002, 123). Mining remained a way of life for the entire family, more so than most other industrial sectors and this remained true for most of the twentieth century.

However, miners and their families may have decided that it was in their best interests to remain in the sector, but they had different aspirations for their children. When asked about this by the interviewers of the INED, whether or not the miners had children, they were almost unanimously of the same view. ‘Ils ne souhaitent pas que leur fils deviennent mineurs et souvent la réponse est très vive, très décidée, <<à aucune prix>> ils ne voudraient.’ Hence, while the *statut* may have led to improvements in the lives of many mining families in tangible ways and the propaganda around representations of miners may have enhanced their self-identification, none of this was sufficient to convince them that their own children should become miners.

The pervasive appeal of the representation of miners as masculine working class heroes did not disappear despite the subsequent somewhat rapid decline of coal and the ensuing dramatic reduction in the mining labour force. The communist trade unions were able to successfully mobilise widespread public support for striking miners in 1963 and again in the 1980s. In both cases, the PCF drew on the same mythologised masculine representations that they had mobilised in the post war period. Miners were projected as fighting for the betterment of all working classes. This male imagery clearly resonated in ways that engendered public sympathy and provided miners and those representing them with a remarkably successful formula.

Notes

1. Much of the material cited here refers to the Gardanne mining basin in Provence. The newspapers drawn on include *Rouge Midi*, *La Marseillaise*, and *Midi-Soir*, communist papers published in Marseille. I am very grateful to the British Academy for the award of a Large Grant which made this research possible.
2. *Un maquis minier de Provence, Les Loups Roudaires et leur chef Jacques Peuvergne, Récit d'un combattant*, Imprimerie d'Éditions Provençales, 1947, p.6. Ironically these young men made poor miners but their labour was nonetheless considered invaluable.
3. Archives Houillères de Provence et du Centre-Midi (HBCM), Plaquette 1947
4. A full text of the discussions around the *statut* appeared in *Droit Minier*, Jan-April 1966.

5. Archives HBCM, Dossier syndicats, 1945.
6. 'Les attitudes des mineurs du Centre-Midi et l'évolution de l'emploi',
Published in Région Languedoc-Rousillon – *Economie et population, INED*
(Institut National Etudes Démographiques), *Travaux et Documents*, PUF, ^{no}
30, 1957
7. Les Charbonnages de France en chiffres, 2004
8. Archives HBCM, Rapports de Gestion 1946-1954
9. Archives HBCM, Rapports de Gestion 1946-1954

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